

as the cost of fuel has risen abruptly. The survey found that 54 percent of Americans believe that the president can do a lot to combat high gas prices.

That's not really true, but it's a dynamic that's shown up in other polls too: 26 percent of respondents told an ABC News/Washington Post poll that they approve of Obama's handling of gas prices, versus 65 percent who disapprove.

For voters to disapprove of Obama's energy and economic policies may be completely rational. But to reassess a president's performance in the context of a short-term increase in gas prices is more of a tantrum-like response to a new feeling of discomfort over which the president has relatively little control.

"Gas prices are a surrogate for Obama performance and evaluations of his job performance," said Steve Lombardo, who worked for Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in 2008 and is the head of the research and consulting firm StrategyOne. "Might not be fair but that is the way it is. The higher the gas prices the lower Obama's approval rating."

That calculus is fairly straightforward, though it's one that has frustrated presidents of both parties for decades. Other examples of the befuddlement of the 2012 voter are tougher to decode.

Take bailouts, for example. Today, Americans loathe the Troubled Assets Relief Program even more than they did in 2008. In the thick of the '08 financial crisis, 57 percent of respondents told Pew that government intervention was appropriate. Now, that number is 39 percent, extending an anti-bailout craze that helped drive the 2008 election.

But Americans aren't opposed to all bailouts, apparently. Amid a flurry of positive earnings reports from GM and Chrysler—and a comeback story told enthusiastically by public figures from Obama to Clint Eastwood—a 56

percent majority of Americans now think bailing out the auto industry was good for the economy. That's up from 37 percent in 2009, according to Pew.

Never mind the fact that the bank bailout has been at least as successful at reviving the financial sector as the auto rescue has been for Detroit.

A similar level of capriciousness is evident in foreign affairs. Americans' views of their overseas entanglements has been on the decline. According to Gallup, just 54 percent of Americans now view the United States as the world's preeminent military power—a 10-point drop since 2010. Last spring, Gallup tracked a quick reversal of public opinion on the intervention in Libya, going from a 10-point net positive public view to a 7-point net negative one over the course of a month. Sixty percent of voters now believe that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting, according to ABC News and the Washington Post.

And yet, Obama—who escalated the Afghan war with a temporary troop surge—continues to break even or fare a bit better than that when it comes to foreign policy and national security. The ABC/Washington Post poll found 46 percent of voters approve of his handling of the war, while 47 percent disapprove. Those aren't great numbers—except they look pretty good when three-fifths of the country think the war was a waste of time and effort.

Gallup analyst Jeffrey Jones said the seeming inconsistencies can come from the fact that voters "probably don't have a whole lot of detailed and specific information about the policies that are being put forward."

"When people evaluate presidents on certain issues, they're probably starting with a pretty global view of how he's doing and then adjust that for how he's doing in a particular area," Jones said. Applying that explanation to the drop in U.S. military confidence, Jones suggested: "It may stem in part from a

global view, that things aren't going that well in the U.S."

Republican presidential strategist Mary Matalin gave a similar explanation for why public opinion often adds up to something different than the sum of its parts. As voters take stock of public events, there's often tension between their feelings about granular policy topics and the overarching principles that encompass those issues.

Like Jensen, she pointed to the debate over health care, suggesting that voters' support for goals like containing the cost of care ended up getting overwhelmed by their distaste for government power—giving rise to an apparent contradiction.

"In large measure, they're often not contradictions," she said. "There was a time when health care, Obamacare, just transcended health care and it became a proxy for counterproductive government expansion. When that flipped from coverage, or cost-cutting of coverage—all the issues that Obama said it was, which people like . . . it has now transcended that."

For voters and politicians and analysts who would prefer to see a more logical, coherent set of public responses to public problems, the good news is this: much of the day-to-day variation in policy polling will not, ultimately, have a major impact on the result of the 2012 election.

Indeed, the sheer irrationality and volatility of voters' views on most issues ends up giving disproportionate weight to the few issues where their opinions are strong and basically stable.

In 2012, that would not necessarily include the auto bailout or the intervention in Libya, or even gas prices as an issue in itself. It would include the larger state of the economy—and maybe nothing else.

"If the economy is bad, that's going to be the single issue and it's almost like nothing else matters," Jones said.

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